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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the results of a study about the interaction between parents and principals throughout British Columbia and Ontario, Canada. For the study, 25 schools and parent councils were involved, and examples from 11 parents are included here. These parents describe school councils operating in a "friendship," "foe," or "evolving" relationship with their school administrator. The paper examines changing legislation that gives parents the authority to form Parent Advisory Councils so that they may advise school boards, school administrators, and school staffs; the use of narrative inquiry; efforts on building a community of leaders; difficult relationships between parents and educators; good relationships between parents and educators; and the evolution of parent involvement. A rationale is developed for the inclusion of parents, as well as a relationship or friendship involving a "true dialogue" between the school administrator and the school council. The paper concludes that a school council of friends can have a powerful impact on the school community and thereby a positive impact on the students of the school. (Contains 32 references.) (RJM)

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The School Council: An Administrator's Friend or Foe

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

Presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association,
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Introduction

"The whole system is there for all the kids and if you join a Parent Advisory Council you assume the responsibility for the other children in the system too." *(Bill)*

The call for proposals for the 1998 AERA Annual General Meeting spoke about the challenge that exists "to educate citizens who can both exercise their differences and contribute to the construction of communities that foster the common good." This paper tells the story of citizens who are trying to do that. It tells the story of parents serving on school and parent advisory councils. Parents joining together to contribute to their school community in caring for the common good of "all children".

The parents who have shared their experiences in this study represent a diverse group of values. But they speak with one voice when they talk about wanting to be listened to and respected by their school administrators. They want to be viewed as "friends" of the school and the administration.

Based on the data collected and the stories told, many parents still do not feel they have any impact on the education system and their local school. They feel that they have been identified as the enemy or "foe". At the same time as various education ministries have been talking about "partnership" with parents, many parents described their feelings of being excluded, or feeling more like poor cousins rather than partners. Some parents used words such as stone-walled, ignored or frustrated, while others spoke of fears of retribution towards their children if they spoke out or questioned the system.

The school administrator occupies the sometimes difficult position of interface between the staff and the school council. The need to work with their parent community is recognized. Creating a relationship that is a friendship is essential.

Why School and Parent Councils?

Parental involvement in schools supports democratic notions whereby, when decisions are made affecting their children, the parents should be given a role or a voice in the process of decision-making (Lewington & Orpwood, 1993; Nikiforuk, 1993; Sarason, 1995). It has been well-documented that parental involvement in the schooling process produces such positive consequences as increased student achievement as well as improved behavior and school attendance (Epstein 1991; Henderson, 1987, 1988; Greenwood & Hickman, 1991).

Parents, teachers and administrators all describe their wish to do what is best for their children or students. Deciding what is "best" is not always easy. It requires open communication and the sharing of information. Decision-making accomplished through some form of consensus, collaborative format increases morale, enthusiasm and a sense of efficacy (Fullan, 1991). "Constant communication and joint work provide the continuous pressure and support necessary for getting things done" (p.84).

One way to accomplish this "constant communication and joint work" is through an established school or parent council. The role of a school council may range from that of an advisory group only, to that of a true decision-making governing body. Joyce Epstein (1991) describes the participation and leadership of parents on school councils as a means whereby parents have input into policies that affect their child's education. "In theory, these school councils would substantially increase the ability of parents and school personnel to influence educational policies and make schools more responsive to the demands of their environment" (Rideout, 1995, p. 12).

Working together with parents on a school council requires the educators to shed old patterns and ideas, including the notion that only they have the knowledge and expertise to solve problems in education (Dixon, 1992). Collaboration is described as an unsettling activity for those who require certainty and a need to have clearly defined goals. What may happen through the process of collaboration is a redirection of goals or an emergence of a new direction as participants experience greater understanding of what is

needed. Without an understanding of the many tensions inherent in a collaborative process participants may find the process frustrating and anxiety producing (Clift, Veal, Holland, Johnson and McCarthy; 1995).

The Southwest Development Laboratory in Austin, Texas, found through an extensive interview process, that parents are eager to play many roles at school (from tutor to decision maker). The barrier to more parent involvement was found not to be parent apathy, but lack of support from the educators (Dixon, 1992). The evidence to date indicates that for parent participation to be a success and not a guise for co-optation (Barlow & Robertson, 1994), the school principal is seen as the key to success or failure (Collins, 1996).

The traditional model of the principal had always been "principal" as the final decision-maker and the ultimate authority of the school. The principal was considered to be the one running the school (Clift et al, 1995). If, in the distant past, there was some golden time when principals were completely in charge and had enough power and authority to totally manage all that was happening in their schools, such days are long gone. "School reformers often write as though any good principal, school board, or alert consumers could steer a school like stagecoach drivers in the Old West. School leaders need only gather the reins and spur the team - or so reformers seem to believe. But schools are no longer like stagecoaches, if ever they were" (Cohen, 1990, p.367). Principals still have the responsibility for "the stagecoach" but they now have many more constituents either wanting to help them steer, or shouting out often diverse travel directions!

School administrators find themselves bombarded with the pressures of numerous curriculum, instructional, contractual and governance changes from without, while at the same time their staff, parents and community provide increased expectations and demands from within. The job of school principals has never been more demanding (Bognar, 1997). At the same time as they are urged to increase efficiency they find themselves expected to collaborate and share decision-making, usually a much slower process. Increased expertise with consensus leadership models and group facilitation skills is essential to accomplish this.

Changing Legislation

In British Columbia Canada, the Public School Act introduced in 1989 provided for the establishment of school and district Parent Advisory Councils (PACs). Through legislation, parents were given the authority to form Parent Advisory Councils in order to advise school boards, school administrators and school staffs regarding any matter relating to the school. The School Act states:

> **A parents' advisory council through its elected officers may advise the board and the principal and staff of the school or the Provincial school respecting any matter relating to the school or the Provincial school.** (Province of British Columbia, 1993, Public School Act : C-22)

Education authorities all across Canada are also currently implementing school committees or councils . Six provinces and the Yukon already have school council legislation in place. The other provinces have draft legislation or legislation pending (Collins, 1996).

These councils generally include parents, teachers and the school principal (and sometimes students and community members), and serve as a place for these partner groups to advise and consult on school issues, share concerns and initiate projects in the interests of students (Canadian Home and School and Parent-Teacher Federation, 1995). Generally these councils serve an "advisory" role.

In some school jurisdictions school or parent councils are treated as education partners able to discuss and give input regarding school philosophy, programs, etc. Unfortunately, many parent council members complain that their input is rarely sought or considered until after the decisions are made (BCCPAC, 1995).

Paulo Freire (1970/1997) writes about the necessity for "true" dialogue. If the education system in it's move to include parents through the establishment of school councils is not wishing this inclusion to develop a "true dialogue", then perhaps this action may be compared to what Freire described as the

"bread and circus" established in ancient Rome. "In ancient Rome" he stated, "the dominant elites spoke of the need to give 'bread and circus' to the people in order to 'soften them up' and to secure their own tranquility" (p.122) .

Freire suggests that although there may be the appearance of dialogue, the methods used may show that the goal of the action is to preserve the status quo. Changing a school council from a foe to a friend requires administrators who are willing to "truly" dialogue with their parents.

Methodology: The Personal Voice of Narrative Inquiry

The research which provided the basis for this paper was a narrative inquiry focused on recording and emphasizing the personal knowledge of the parents regarding the school system and their experience with parent councils and school administrators. Although the initial research followed the course of one entire school year, follow-up data was also collected over the next year and a half.

This study began with the collection of narratives from seven parents within one school district representing, in total, ten parent councils. The parents chosen represented a range of small and large, in-town and rural schools . They were interviewed several times over the school year, usually following a Parent Council meeting. All of the interviews were taped, with written transcripts of the interviews prepared afterwards.

Triangulation occurred through the attendance of the researcher at a number of the PAC meetings over the course of the study. As well, four of the participants were involved with and reviewed some of the same Parent Council meetings.

The geographic range of the study widened as an on-line dialogue began with fifteen parents from other jurisdictions . Most of these parents belonged to either a British Columbia based Parent Network list-serve (TPON) or to a cross-Canada education reform bulletin board, EDUCAN which originates at Humber College in Ontario.

Parents joined the study on-line after a brief description of the research was posted on the TPON list-serve with an invitation for interested parents to contact the researcher. Parents who joined the study on-line were sent a copy of the research proposal and signed an ethics form which indicated that as well as on-line dialogue they might be requested to take part in a face-to-face interview. Approximately half of the on-line parents were interviewed personally. Copies of agenda and minutes of school council meetings were gathered from several of the on-line parent narrators in order to provide a broader context to their experiences.

The same questions were asked of these "on-line" parents. Were they involved in their school or parent councils? What had their experiences been like? What kind of a friendship or "partnership" did they actually have with their schools and administrators?

The parents in this study whose stories were most hopeful were those who felt that they were being listened to and valued by the administration of the system. They felt they had a meaningful relationship or meaningful involvement. Their parent council was in a friendship with their school administrator.

Those most frustrated, discouraged and angry were those who felt that the educators were deliberately silencing them and treating them as "foes". They felt totally blocked or ignored. Others felt the administrators were going through the motions of listening but were in reality only paying them lip-service.

Friends or foes, two extremes of positive and negative relationships. However, relationships often develop and evolve over time and this was the situation described by a third group of parents. These parents described changes in their relationships with their schools and administrators and felt that a sharing of power and true listening were beginning to happen. These parents felt that their councils were evolving into a council of friends.

A Focus on Building "A Community of Leaders"

Formation of a school council may be the mandate of a state or province or of a local school district. In some cases an individual principal may initiate the formation of a school or parent council. Research on school councils in the state of Iowa and South Dakota (Heath & Vik, 1996) indicated that major reasons for developing school councils were to build broader-based accountability for school decisions, to create a stronger focus on a results-orientation improvement agenda, and to enhance the sense of community among the school population.

School and parent councils can provide a "window" for other parents into the school in order to keep communications clear by bringing issues into the open or even reducing rumours. Results of school council discussions can be reported out to the rest of the community through the distribution of meeting minutes and newsletters. The use of community cable television is another way for schools to broadcast reports of their school and council activities.

Barth (1990), describes his vision for school as a place where parents become leaders (along with the students, teachers and principals), in order to create a "community of leaders". The role for the principal is described as someone who remains in the background, acting as advisor, facilitator and executive officer. Administrators need to share opportunities and responsibilities for making decisions " that affect all occupants of the schoolhouse" (p.9). There would be a need for patience on the part of the administrator as this new culture of shared leadership was created. Barth believes that school people can reform their schools from within, and that it is likely that "only" changes from within will bring lasting improvement to schools! A school or parent council of friends is one way for administrators to accomplish this.

The Parents Speak: A Council of Foes

A feeling of "community", the opportunity for "shared decision-making", a focus on "clear communication", these are all positive visions for what

should be. We begin though with the present, with what-is. The first parent voices heard are the voices of parents speaking through an on-line dialogue. They describe their discouraging experiences with their school or parent councils. Lynn speaks first. She has two high school aged children with one child still in elementary school. Lynn hoped that the mandated formation of school councils would provide for a place where parents could meet with the elementary school administrator and discuss issues of concern. She writes:

"I volunteered to be a member of our Council because I viewed it as an opportunity to have some real input regarding the improvement of our reading and writing program. I have one child (grade 6) left in this system. My other two went from Kindergarten to grade 8 at our school, and are now in high school.

When I heard about 'parent majority school councils' I thought that finally parents would have the opportunity to share concerns and actually be listened to. Well, we had nine parents volunteer. Since the maximum allowed is 15, our Principal decided that there would be no need for elections and we were all acclaimed.

We have had only one meeting. Since we had not elected a Chairperson yet, our Principal took it upon himself to set up the first agenda. Before the meeting adjourned, a few of the parents mentioned that we would like to discuss curriculum. It was agreed that it would be on the agenda for the next meeting.

When we received our copy of the minutes of the last meeting and the agenda for the next meeting, curriculum was blatantly missing from the agenda. I made a visit to the school today to talk with our Principal and ask if this was intentional or a mistake. I was told that he had the secretary type everything that was in his notes and he doesn't think that curriculum was there, but he did remember it was mentioned. He then proceeded to tell me that Hot Dogs are also curriculum. I questioned this, and was told that 'curriculum is everything that affects a child's learning at school. It is a very big topic.'

I then tried to share with him regarding recent studies which show that a systematic phonics program is needed to ensure good reading skills and habits. I told him that this is what several council members would like to discuss at our Council meeting. He then gave me a lengthy lecture about how they already include some phonics and that our Board allows it but it does not advocate it.

This is getting too long so I will quit, but I am beginning to remember why I gave up, four years ago, trying to change anything at our school. I really wonder if there is any point in trying." (*Lynn*)

"Hot Dogs" as curriculum? The one topic that several parents wanted to discuss "left off the agenda" either intentionally or by mistake? And the "lengthy lecture" that other parents have described to me as their experience when they ask questions or share concerns with their administrator. These discouraging experiences of Lynn's are not unique. They are repeated in other narratives.

Malkin currently has two children in secondary school. She was very interested in their schooling and was interested in working closely with the school. She describes her experiences when her children were in elementary school when she was a parent interested in "curriculum".

"At the beginning, when our Curriculum Committee was formed, we were all there because we hoped to be able to find ways to contribute to the children's successful learning. We were looking to the principal for guidance as to how best we could do this. The new principal presented herself as very receptive to our activities. In retrospect, perhaps she was trying out different ways to contain the potential threat. At first she seemed very positive, but gradually became very controlling. I can only surmise that she felt threatened by a group of parents who were interested in 'quality education'.

If there was a turning point, it might have been when we volunteered to prepare and circulate to the parents at the school a compact, easily-understood summary of the board's curriculum, K-6. (We had an example from a school in the States which had done this.)

At that point, it began to get a little chilly. The chilliness was nothing you could really put your finger on. But we began to hear rumours that the principal was critical of us at staff meetings. She was no longer quite as accessible to us and it was harder to get cooperation. Parents and teachers began to drop off the committee and our numbers began to dwindle.

I'm not sure our Curriculum committee was ever stopped in our tracks from doing a specific project, but our requests were never honoured, help was never given, promises were made and then not kept. For example, the curriculum guides - the principal said it was a good idea, promised to look into it - and then did nothing. Our prompts got us nowhere.

Gradually we stopped proposing projects such as bringing in speakers; we knew there was no point. I suppose it became like self-censorship.

The long-term fall-out? Well, new school councils are mandated in Ontario, as you know, and there were supposed to be elections at every school. Unfortunately not enough parents stood for election at our school to warrant an election, only six or seven parents indicated their willingness and so I think they have been acclaimed.

We don't hear anything about their activities and no one is sufficiently interested to ask. The first time around (when our curriculum committee and the other committees were being formed), there were 40 or 50 interested parents. I guess most people have just walked away from involvement - they don't see any point.

Our story is quite typical. In 1998, interest in school councils is negligible throughout the Waterloo Region. I don't know of one school council that is fulfilling the substantive role envisaged by the Ontario government. Most principals are still calling all the shots."
(*Malkin*)

Malkin's story began in hopefulness but her description of requests not honoured, help not given and promises not kept led her to question whether or not the administrator truly wanted to work with parents, or simply wished to control them.

Andrew has two teenagers. He describes himself as an active parent over the years, involved in many school and PAC activities. He writes on-line about his experiences with Parent Advisory Council meetings.

"I've seen the same pattern many times. Lots of parents show up at the first Parent Advisory Council (PAC) meeting of the year. Then when they see that any contentious education issues are overtly or covertly downplayed (because it's 'bad manners to be negative' by questioning things, or 'Whoops we ran out of time'), they don't bother coming back for the rest of the year. Very few attempt to actually try and change the direction of the PAC. It's just too difficult.

Principals usually stage-manage the council meetings. Controlling the information, the tone, carefully keeping a lid on things. It's like having your parents in your room when you're a teenage boy and your friends are over and you want to talk about girls. The principal's comments tend to follow the same restrictive patterns: 'You can't talk about that.' or as an

excuse, 'It's a district policy.' Parents who won't accept these excuses are told 'That's an excellent point. I'll look into that and let you know.' But that's the end of it.

And if questioned about staff or personnel practices principals often respond 'This is an excellent school. All our teachers are excellent'. If a parent actually dares criticize, they're told 'Your comments are libelous and actionable by law.'

The power equation just does not include parents at the present time." (*Andrew*)

Andrew's description of a power equation not even including parents indicates that for him "true dialogue" is not taking place. Advice from principals with successful school councils include the suggestion that a principal must act as a consensus builder rather than a commander. They suggest that some principals will need training to exercise this type of leadership (Heath & Vik, 1996).

Although the purpose and functioning of the council should not include the public discussion of any specific personnel issues, parents leaving a school council meeting should have a clear understanding of how to have any of their individual concerns addressed. If the goal of the council is to work with the administrator in providing the best possible learning environment for students, it is unlikely that such "stage managed" meetings will move this goal forward.

A Council of Friends

Not all parents were feeling as discouraged or frustrated as the first set of parents. The next set of narratives involves parents who have seen their school administrators working to establish a friendship with their school council.

Margaret's children are also in secondary school. She has been an involved parent for many years. She describes her Parent Advisory Council (PAC) as a place where the school administrator tries to involve the parents with the

school. She feels that her parent group is consulted for advice as important decisions are being made.

> **"Whenever they are coming up with something new at the High School, he (the principal) sounds it out at the staff meeting and then sounds it out with us. For example, before he adopted the Copernican time-table he talked it over with us and asked us questions. He really does try to involve the parents. The time-tabling of a school is a big issue. He's not asking us for hot-dog money, he's asking us about major decisions in the school."** (*Margaret*)

The relationship that Margaret describes is one of respect. She sees their work together as involving "major decisions".

Tammy has been a PAC parent and has been involved in school activities for many years also. Her eldest children have all graduated and only one daughter remains to complete her secondary schooling. Tammy described how changes have taken place with her administrators and the Parent Council.

> **"In 1992 the principal at my school told me I should run the PAC meetings. He coached me and told me how to do it. He suggested I should be the one to set the agenda. He told me 'these meetings aren't mine, they're yours'."** (*Tammy)*

Doreen has two children in elementary school. She describes an administrator working in a friendship with his parents.

> **"Jack Lodge is an example of a principal followed by parents from school to school. Jack does not play politics at all. He is very good at creating a community of all the staff, parents and students at his school. I watched him doing the 'Curriculum Change' meetings and he kept repeating 'I really believe that this is best for students but I will never do anything that would divide our community'. He had 100% of staff and 95% of parents support him with the changes. He genuinely puts the kids ahead of everything."** (*Doreen*)

Anne reviewed a PAC meeting where she felt the discussion was helpful for parents. The parents had requested that the principal explain the class placement of students in the school and she describes how the principal responded:

"The principal has quite a challenge working with the teachers to place kids in classes for the next year. He explained the process at our PAC meeting. The principal explained that every student has to be considered so that all the rowdy kids aren't in one class and the boys and girls have to be spread out evenly. I enjoyed hearing all the other kind of information that was used by the staff and I gained some insight into now it was done and how our kids are placed." (*Anne*)

Andrew wrote earlier about the pattern established at most PAC meetings where the principal "stage-manages" the meetings. As part of his involvement with this research study he continued to attend PAC meetings on a regular basis and subsequently after a later meeting described a principal "opening up" and speaking honestly to the PAC group. Possibly the small size of the group allowed the principal to feel he could speak more frankly. Andrew writes:

"Tonight we had a PAC meeting at my kids' secondary school. There were only six of us and the principal . Our principal opened up honestly about some of the issues regarding what had been discussed at the previous district meeting. He explained what the superintendent couldn't get into in any detail, but is in fact a huge issue regarding the proposed changes. The issue is - you got it - the contract. The almighty teachers' contract. Turns out there'll be a huge number of expensive grievances to deal with if this planned change goes ahead. " *(Andrew)*

Giving parents honest information about the "real" reasoning behind certain "educational" decisions is essential. Whether it's class placement of students, or contractual obligations that must be honored, parents need to have as much information as possible.

The next parent, Ronaye, is the chair of a Parent Advisory Council of a small rural school. She describes a collaborative working relationship with her school administrator.

"A lot of PAC executive meetings at our small school consist of the principal and me. I always ask for agenda items at the previous parent council meeting and then I ask the principal if there's anything else to be added. The agenda is set in collaboration with the principal, the whole process is not very formal." (*Ronaye*)

Having the PAC president and the school principal setting agenda "in collaboration" indicates the shared role and shared responsibilities. We are in a period where parents and administrators are uncertain of their roles and are having to learn new roles (Silky, 1995) . " It is no longer as simple as it used to be when teachers taught, administrators managed and parents supported" (p. 56).

An article written in 1984, almost fifteen years ago, "Parent Advisory Councils: School Partners or Handy Puppets", describes some school council research of that time. It was shown that principals' attitudes towards school councils were more often than not, negative (Foster, 1984). Principals indicated that they found their job difficult enough just dealing with angry and disgruntled parents at school each day, without having them become a formal presence in the functioning of their school. That view was of the school council as a foe.

Fifteen years later, the narratives of these parents serving on "friendship" councils speak about their administrators consulting with them, coaching them, speaking honestly with them and working collaboratively with them. They describe a supportive friendly relationship. The paradoxical advantage for the administrator of giving up or sharing power is that ultimately he or she may gain more support and strength. Sharing power is not necessarily like dividing up a pie. Principals who power-share have learned that more power for some does not mean less for others (Nathan, 1991).

An Evolving Council

Although many principals have found these role changes difficult, others have been able to encourage increased council member participation, offer suggestions to improve the quality of council discussions and freely share information in order to facilitate better council decisions (Easton & Storey, 1994). Principal leadership has been described as "the key to engaging the council in real decision making" (p. 236).

In a large national study in the United States (the National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988), information was gathered from more than 1,000

public and private schools and involved surveys of 20,000 parents (Epstein & Lee, 1995). This study, focused on eighth graders, provided a huge amount of information on the effects of family involvement with schools.

From this study it was seen that 20% or fewer middle grade parents join the PTA or parent organization or council. One reason given for this was that approximately 15% of the middle grades schools studied had no parent organizations at all. Another reason for the small number of parents becoming involved in this type of format was the requirement of dues to be paid in some parent groups. In some groups, it was suggested, the "regulars" may directly or indirectly dissuade some of the families from joining or becoming active.

These barriers to the formation of a school council of friends can be overcome by a caring, inclusionary school administrator. There needs to be an opportunity for parents to attend a school or parent council meeting without the expectation of fees or dues to be paid. Creative approaches must be used in order to include parents from diverse cultural backgrounds. One approach might include the use of trained representative parents or educators to meet with ethnic and racial groups separately and then report back to the school or school council regarding their specific problems, issues and concerns (Chrispeels, 1991).

The lack of welcome for new parents is something that also must be discussed as a problem or barrier to effective parent involvement and then worked on and improved. The experience is one that is universal. Sandra describes her PAC which during her first year of involvement was "not very inviting".

> **" Our Parent Council says it wants new blood. But they're not very inviting to new parents. It's like there's a core group , and they've been a core group for so long that it seems like they all pretty well know each other. Now that their kids are in grade seven they say they need new blood on the parent council, but they haven't done anything about it. They seem to do things a certain way, and those of us who want to come in, need to learn the way 'they've' been doing things.**

People at the meeting don't know my name. There's no real social element to the meeting. People aren't introduced. I went and helped at pizza day and so finally two other parent council members, who were also helping there, now know my name. At the meeting I sit very quiet, but I'm thinking about things. I'd like to suggest they try this or that, but nobody knows me so I don't say anything." *(Sandra)*

The best predictor of parent involvement is what the school does to promote it (Nathan, 1991). Council members need to be encouraged to welcome and introduce all parents who attend meetings. Parents like Sandra need to be encouraged to speak and respond to issues or the discussion. Round table or focus-group formats need to be included in the meeting procedures so that all parents are given the opportunity to contribute.

School Administrators wanting to help parent leaders create councils of friendship may need to encourage "friendship" techniques such as "parent-greeters" who wait at the door to shake hands and welcome attendees, the use of name-tags, a time for introductions at every meeting, a mid-meeting coffee break, or some small group discussion scheduled into the meeting. Such activities will ensure that new or shy parents feel welcomed to the group. Experienced administrators have suggested that at least one social event be planned each year in order to encourage council members in building rapport and collegiality.

In British Columbia training workshops on various school council topics are included during any provincial parent meetings that are held. These are a helpful way for parents to learn how to take on the much needed parent leadership role. One recent session was on running effective council meetings. Elizabeth describes what happened when she brought this information back to her administrator.

"I went to a workshop on effective meetings. We discussed things like seating arrangements. At the next parent council meeting the room was set up with the chairs in a U shape. The principal and the vice-principal were in the middle of the U and the council executive was along one side. I couldn't see from where I was sitting because I was on one of the corners

of the U. And I thought 'This isn't right. A parent meeting being run by the principal and the vice-principal !'

And so I went in to see the principal and talk to him about it and asked for a change of seating so the chairperson and the parents on the executive could be seen by all the parents as they should be the ones running the meeting. I was kind of surprised with the response I got. I thought it would take five minutes to talk about it. Instead it was like I was coming in there with an attitude problem and I was going to try to change everything. He thought I was trying to change the whole structure of the meetings and even make them change where their meetings were (from being in the library to the band room so there would be a stage and a place for people to sit separate from the executive).

I said, 'No, I'm not wanting that. I just would like all the parents to see the parent executive as running our meetings.' So forty-five minutes later I left and I really didn't know whether he really understood what I was talking about. I think he was more concerned that I was going to be a disruptive parent. I tried really hard to be calm and not to be upset by his reaction because I felt that he just didn't understand what I was saying.

But I figured I'd better step back and just see what happened at the next meeting. Well the next meeting came and the same U shape was set up but the principal and the vice principal weren't sitting in the U. They were sitting separate and so obviously they had discussed it and understood my suggestion for some changes. A circle would have been fine, or any other set up in order to ensure that the seating didn't seem exclusive.

Over time it has changed and I feel now I can go in there at any time and be comfortable talking with the principal about my ideas. I think he realizes that I'm not going to be absurd, or obnoxious or request some pie-in-the-sky suggestion that there's no way anyone can deliver. He feels more comfortable with me.

Parental involvement is like a relationship. You make an effort to get along even if you have really different opinions of things. You have to accept others for who they are and let their opinions stand just the way they are without you feeling like you have to change everything at once."
(*Elizabeth*)

Elizabeth found that her suggestions were listened to. Although she wasn't sure that there was a clear understanding about her initial concerns and ideas, the administrator followed through, showed his willingness to work in friendship with her and facilitated some changes to the PAC seating plan. As

well, he continued to listen to Elizabeth and other parents so that their working relationship is now comfortable and supportive.

Tammy has worked closely over the years, being encouraged by her school administrators, and she in turn encouraging them. Now that her last daughter is in senior high school, she has implemented some of the PAC activities that worked well at her childrens' junior secondary school. Her new school administrator has worked with her and the PAC parents to make sure these ideas became a reality.

> **"Our Parent Advisory Council is trying different ways to get parents into the school. Things like our barbecue at the Senior High. We had four hundred people there, it went really well. It was informal with students, parents, the administrators and teachers there. Everyone talked, person to person.**
>
> **We also had 125 parents at our meeting about post-secondary school programs and funding. There were lots there because we suggested not just zeroing in on students applying to university but we invited parents and kids who were interested in trade schools and other courses. We try to get all of the parents phoned so they know about the meeting. We advertise on the radio too."** (*Tammy*)

Boyd's only daughter has now graduated from secondary school but he spent many evenings at parent council meetings during her senior years at school. In his on-line dialogue about his experience with the parent council meetings he made some suggestions for school administrators to consider when setting up their first PAC meeting of the year:

> **"Let's say the principal went to the first PAC meeting and instead of telling the assembled parents how many kids signed up for volleyball and when the first Math contest is , instead, what if the Administrator provided a list of five standing committees to be composed of representatives from the teachers, parents and administration?**
>
> **The role of each of the committees would be to advise the principal on matters of a specific nature and to liaise with their constituent groups on those same matters. The committees might include: 1.) Academics--what's taught, how is it taught, how is participation encouraged, etc.? 2.) Extra curricular--how do we continue to have lots of school teams when we have so few teachers able or willing to coach or sponsor them? 3.) Mentoring/Counselling--what systems can we put in place to ensure**

that none of our students fall through the cracks? 4.) Administration policy--What kind of timetableing and blocking should the school use? What sort of feedback should students/parents get in regards to student progress? Should we continue to have mid term exams in February? How can we allocate funds most effectively? 5.) Community Relations--how can we encourage participation in school activities by local business and other community residents?

I venture to suggest that any principal who did this would not be overwhelmed by the rush to volunteer, but would find that they had a few dedicated and capable parents who would be interested in participating in a defined way and who could make a real contribution.

In short, the principal, as CEO of the school, should see parent involvement, not as a hindrance but as an asset. Continuous efforts at 'real' inclusion would pay huge dividends." (*Boyd*)

These changes in new ways of collaborating and governing are hard, slow and time consuming (Meier, 1995). We see democratic notions being played out in these shifting possibilities. Shifts in power relationships are difficult. "They cannot be initiated on Monday and measured on Friday" (p. 373).

Parents and administrators need to benefit from and respond to what Etzioni (1994) describes as the "collective wisdom" that arises from a consensus of parents' groups after they fully understand the schools' circumstances and are able to dialogue with one another to build consensus. Freire (1970/1997) would insist that it be "true dialogue" though, and not " bread and circus" intended to keep the parents placated.

School administrators who are indeed trying to create a school council of friends need to encourage their parent leaders to help them in the increased amount of work that is needed. Although such collaboration may be difficult, ambiguous, uncomfortable and time-consuming, the resulting "community of leaders" promises a wider knowledge base and expertise with the myriad of problems that educators face. A school council of friends can have a powerful impact on the school community and thereby a positive impact on the students of the school.

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